

Connecting the Dots: Wildfire, Forest Health, and Sustainable Rural Economies

**Notes from the Webposium Sutter Creek Regional Discussion
October 29th, 2009**

Hosted by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

SUTTER CREEK

1. From the morning panel discussions, what resonated for you?

- Mistrust of agencies that say “come, we want your input” and pretend to be collaborative, but are ultimately not.
- Mistrust of the new modified THP process since it calls certain actions “fuels reduction” projects that are more like plantation management plans
- The BOF representative was misrepresenting position of the opposition to the modified timber harvest plan (THP).
- Concern about exceptions to private land regulation that are granted by enforcement officers
- Too much emphasis on financial incentives and not enough on regulation.

2. What is your vision of success? All participants agreed that (re)creating the wealth/health in the Sierra is linked to all 3: economics, environment and social.

3. What is our “starting point for action”?

- Development pressure - There is continued pressure to convert agriculture lands to residential development – it is so hard to stave off because it is so hard to actively “work the land” due to regulations, viability, etc. The biggest incentive to stay with a working landscape is assurance that their resource timber management/ economics will be able to exist “forever” in a more stable environment.

4. What are the barriers or hurdles to overcome?

- Supply certainty - We need assurances that the biomass available is sufficient economically for the long term. Investors must have commitment (long-term, apolitical) in order to succeed with a biomass plant
- Litigation - USFS/BLM management is driven by fear of lawsuits and politics cause big policy shifts.
- Need long-term agreements - Would not even consider getting into biomass unless very long term agreement, but also don’t think that could ever happen given the management style (political) of public agencies.

5. What level of planning needs to go into these goal/activities?

- Preserving infrastructure - There is a great need to make infrastructures (saw mills, biomass plants, etc.) more “preservable”. If you lose the infrastructure the industry cannot make a recovery in the future as other variables improve.
- Mechanized methods of fuels treatment are crucial because prescribed fire alone will not create resilient forests.
- Economic development - Sierra Nevada region is changing from an entrepreneurial/industrial job base into service industry jobs that can’t sustain a family. We have to “create wealth” from our sustainable resources found here.

6. What projects are going on currently or in the past?

- Buena Vista Plant – they are looking at how to bring local contractors online. There are contractors coming together as a co-operative and looking at what other markets for biomass. Locals have location(s) and harvesting equipment. They need a reliable supply.
- Heating pellets / bedding / greenhouse supplies
- PM Cedar Mill
- Sierra Fresh – a pilot project that is working (biomass/co-gen) using agricultural waste/urban, organic tomatoes, etc.

What is the potential for establishment of a new local biomass or wood products facility?

Calaveras County has lots of private lands, and so could sustain small local biomass plant. The local area used to have a lot of smaller local mills but now has only a large one in Ione. Some of the smaller operations may have been forced out by the pressure of regulations and lack of a steady supply. Some participants said it would be better to have small locally-owned biomass infrastructure and supply rather than a big plant like the one in Ione. Technology for small plants is there, but doesn't seem to be being implemented. Utilities are wielding the power of grid, making it risky to invest. In the past you could get a guaranteed price for 10 years. If portable units become viable, it would really improve operational capacity.

Some participants were also concerned about the possibility of eventually removing too much understory through treatments targeting only small trees. Using Best Management Practices is one way to maintain harmony. Biomass infrastructure should be driven by the ecosystem requirements of each region. Management can be done this way, with Collins Pine as an example. However, the USFS does not use the same approach.

What are the reasons for success or failure of a biomass facility nearby?

Impediments to project success

- Political dynamics especially with people who benefit from the conflicts
- Political districts (should be redrawn) and bureaucracy
- Lack of resources - People are ready, but there are not enough resources to implement
- Scale - Carbon credit and biomass programs are skewed to big business, not private, small landowners.

The key elements for success

- An assured supply - Stewardship agreements (like the Eldorado Forest) could be the best vehicle for assuring supply. Funding for fire suppression should be reallocated to prevention through awarding stewardship contracts.
- Private regulatory relief - Reductions in THP costs for smaller owners would help make things more profitable so they don't feel the need to cut more than they might want in order to pay for planning costs.
- Changes in market prices. There are opportunities to generate income from fuels projects but there is a need to develop trust around that using education and field trips.
- Adaptive management should be used for biomass harvesting. However, adaptive management is only effective if we make improvements in management each time we repeat a task/action. Think about time and management on a big scale (multi-generation

/100 years). We are at a fork in the road, if we stay within certain parameters, we can proceed, using BMPs.

7. Who here today can contribute to developing local collaboration?

8. Who is missing from today's discussion? Who needs to be at the table?

- Federal land managers
- Planning Commissions
- Sierra Pacific Industries
- Fire safe councils
- Local political leaders/regulators/decision-makers
- Agencies/ground
- Private enterprise
- Local environmental communities
- State Fish & Game, etc.
- Tribal leaders
- Local, non-elected leaders
- Small and larger timberland owners
- Facilitator, note taker (third party preferred)

To foster success:

- Use the media
- Have a spokesperson to develop press releases
- Let people own the project
- Use community organizing techniques
- Tackle a few specific project/topic/actions to develop a few quick wins
- Have courage / strategies / patience / vision

9. What are the next steps?

- Analyze the outreach done for this event
- Make political connections - Get the Regional Council of Rural Counties' attention for political weight
- Make contacts - Ask panel members to make personal contact with colleagues
- Do outreach – Make it more from organization to organization constituent
- Educate - Give a short presentation on biomass for agencies/ County supervisors' meetings to educate people on fuels reduction / fire protection / energy / employment. Talk about how other counties are doing it

Feedback on the day:

- The format was good with no power points, but would have been better if two-way communication was possible with the panel.
- The panel did a great job
- It was nice to have this locally and not have to drive.
- The format and facilitator were good.
- Next time have more locations